

TOWN OF GROTON
 CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
 REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
 September 12, 2016
 TOWN HALL ANNEX – COMMUNITY ROOM 2

Chair Pro Tem Aument called the meeting to order at 6:34 p.m.

I. ROLL CALL:

Members Present: Chair Pro Tem Scott Aument, Commissioners Kathy Chase, Jane Dauphinais, Robert Frink, Patrice Granatosky, Rosanne Kotowski, Brandon Marley, Daniel Mello, Darcy Peruzzotti, and Jennifer White.

Members Absent: Chairperson Hauber

II. Approval of Minutes:

- a. A motion was made by Commissioner Granatosky, seconded by Commissioner Chase, to approve the minutes of the August 22, 2016 meeting.

Vote: 8-0-2 Abstain (Commissioners Peruzzotti and White abstain)

III. Communications:

- a. Chair Pro Tem Aument: None
- b. Secretary: None
- c. Members:

Commissioner Frink stated that he researched the town of Truckee, California. He stated that the town has 20,000 residents during the week and 50,000 residents during the weekend. He noted that the town does not allow non-resident homeowners to vote in elections and referendums, and 51 percent of homeowners are non-residents. He stated that the Truckee has community input at the beginning of the budget process including goal-setting sessions. He concluded his statement by stating that he spoke with the Chair of the Board of Finance (six-person) in Glastonbury (functions as a mini RTM), and the Board of Finance presents the budget to the Town Council. He noted that Glastonbury's population is approximately 35,000 and the school budget is 101,000,000 dollars.

Commissioner Granatosky noted that Glastonbury belongs to DRG B and Groton belongs to DRG G, and she noted that it is important to consider the population the Town of Groton serves.

IV. New Business:

- a. Presentation by Town Manager Mark Oefinger.

Town Manager Oefinger stated that Groton has had the current form of government for approximately sixty years, is stable, professional, the Town Manager is not political, and it serves the community well. He stated that it is not about the form of government; it is all about the people serving. He stated that Groton is very complicated with having Groton Long Point, the City, nine fire districts, and a complex tax situation. He noted that he thinks that the RTM works well, even after the difficult budget sessions he had this year with the RTM. He stated that it is difficult to get consensus on anything in this community because of the different political areas of the Town. He stated that if there is a referendum, a budget may never get approved. He stated that there are sections of the Town that expect services for the taxes that they pay. He noted that Groton has one of the lowest mill rates in Connecticut (approx. 145th or

147th out of 169 towns). He offered that he would be happy to track down documentation regarding various forms of government. He reviewed that there have been several studies on Groton's form of government. He stated that the RTM was supposed to be an interim form of government leading to the consolidation between the City and Town. He concluded his comments by offering that he is willing to return to the Commission in the future.

In response to Commissioner White, the Town Manager stated that the Charter was updated in 2008 and there were housekeeping items that did not get addressed. He stated that there is a separate document that deals with Boards and Commissions, and a lot of references to Boards and Commissions were taken out of the Charter in 2008. He stated that there are approximately 250 people involved with Boards and Commissions, he thinks the Boards and Commissions work well, but it appears that it is hard to get people to volunteer for a Board/Commission. He noted that based upon his experience, people do not like goal setting. He stated that staggered terms may be something to look at. He stated that it was good that a lot of detail regarding departments was taken out of the Charter. He stated that a frequent topic of conversation is combining some Town functions with Board of Education functions which may enhance capabilities, but he is uncertain as to how much money it would save. He stated that the RTM is a diverse group, and Groton does not need a larger RTM. He stated that he does not know if the number of RTM members is a problem. He noted that there are placeholders on the RTM and that is unfortunate. He re-stated that he believes the RTM works.

Commissioner Peruzzotti asked if this charter is too detailed.

Town Manager Oefinger stated that he believes calling for an Ethics ordinance does not belong in the Charter. He noted that using the Charter to dictate what the Council needs to do to set-up a committee does not belong in the Charter. He stated that he views the Charter as Groton's equivalent to the US Constitution.

In response to Commissioner White, Town Manager Oefinger stated that this year's five percent cut across the board pained him. He stated that the Town is past arbitrary cuts. He noted the Public Works was cut almost ten percent. Town Manager Oefinger stated that the budget is thorough. He noted that he looks at what the Board of Education submits and what the Town submits. He stated that it takes one evening to go through the Board of Education's budget, but it takes eight or nine evenings to go through the Town's budget.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that the Board of Education's budget can't be touched.

Commissioner White questioned if the budget should meet goals before it is submitted.

Town Manager Oefinger reviewed that the Town Manager's budget is the first step in the process, and it is a proposal. He stated that he receives feedback from Department Heads for a level-service budget and then he makes adjustments to the budget. He noted there are a lot of variables that go into the budget that are always changing based on State and Federal factors. He noted that the Finance Director and Town Manager are conservative when formulating the budget.

In response to Commissioner Peruzzotti, Town Manager Oefinger stated that given the make-up of Groton, more than five people would be needed for a Board of Finance. He stated that having regular citizens who are interested in their community that may have finance/education/recreation program interest would work well.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that elected boards are dependent on party nominations and voters.

In response to Commissioner Mello, Manager Oefinger stated that the Town Council is the policy maker of the Town, and the RTM is the ultimate decider on the budget and has ongoing budgetary responsibilities throughout the year to include passing referendum and ordinances, account transfers, use of contingency dollars, etc.

Commissioner Mello stated that he is hearing the following: RTM is good for representation but it is hard to get people to serve on the RTM. He questioned if it would be beneficial to reduce the size of the RTM. He stated that it is curious that Groton is one of the only municipalities that has a RTM.

Town Manager Oefinger stated a RTM of a lower number, perhaps thirty people, may work.

In response to Commissioner Dauphinais, Town Manager Oefinger stated that goal setting is very important. He noted that he works for a Council of nine and not nine Councilors. He noted that he has yet to meet a Council that likes goal setting, but including a strategic plan or goal setting in the Charter may be useful.

Commissioner Dauphinais questioned if there was a way to address the complexity and fragmentation of Groton's government in the Charter.

Town Manager Oefinger stated that one of the sad things that the last Charter Revision Commission did was it removed the Town-wide Fire Marshal. He stated that having different Fire Marshals who interpret the fire code differently is not helpful.

In response to Commissioner Dauphinais, Town Manager Oefinger stated that the Inland Wetlands and Planning Commissions could be combined. He noted that the Conservation Commission is advisory. He stated that he does not know whether three commissions should be combined because of the volume of work.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that combining specific Commissions does not belong in the Charter.

Commissioner Kotowski asked if it would be useful to set-up how the Council directs the budget before it gets put together. She noted that the Town Manager has shared his frustration that the Town Council does not give specific direction before the budget is put together.

Town Manager Oefinger stated that he prefers to not receive budget direction with specific percentages. He stated that the budget development process that the current Charter lays out is a good approach, and he is constantly receiving input on the budget. He noted that investment in infrastructure is not happening.

In response to Commissioner Kotowski, Town Manager stated "Well this is a proposal. This isn't how it's done now. I think the system that we have now works perfectly fine." He continued by stating that when money is left over at the end of the year, a fair amount of money is returned, and he tries to make sure the Town does not go through a spring spending spree. He noted that the Town Manager needs to approve changes in spending that were not budgeted for in a department. He noted that transfers between departments would need Council and RTM approval.

In response to Commissioner Chase, Town Manager stated that a four-year term seems like a long time for someone to commit to serve. He stated that he is not a big believer in term restrictions or limits.

In response to Commissioner Frink questions, Town Manager Oefinger stated that the Council needs to set the tone of the budget discussion. He noted that he would like to get the Council and RTM on the same page. He stated that the Council's goals on the budget are incremental. He emphasized that economic development should be a long-term investment in the community and not something that provides instantaneous gratification.

Commissioner Frink stated that there are no measurable results or policy statements.

In response to Commissioner Granatosky, Town Manager Oefinger stated that the current form of government has worked well in this community. He noted that a Strong Mayor form of government would be a big change, and an elected Strong Mayor is the luck of the draw. He noted that there are communities that have been well-served by the First Selectmen form of government. He stated that the Town Manager could be let go if you do not like what he or she is doing. He noted that the form of government is not as important as the types of people who are getting involved.

In response to Commissioner Chase, Town Manager Oefinger stated that the wishes and goals of the Town Council regarding the budget are not submitted in writing to the RTM.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that members of the RTM attend Council hearings, or watch them on television, to see what is happening with the Town Council. She noted that over the years there has been an adversarial relationship between the RTM and the Town Council.

In response to Chair Pro Tem Aument, Town Manager Oefinger stated that as a result of a change that was made to the Charter in 2008, there is a lame duck Council for over a month.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that he likes what the Town Manager spoke about regarding a Town-wide Fire Marshal. He noted that if change happens, it may take a while.

Commissioner Mello reviewed Charter sections 2.5 and 2.6 regarding subdivisions and consolidation.

Commissioner Frink stated that section 2.5 is a reaffirmation of an authority that already exists.

In response to Commissioner Dauphinais, Town Manager Oefinger stated that the department heads and Town Manager could present the budget to the Council and RTM at the same time. He noted that there is one public hearing on the budget, but that citizens comments during the RTM Annual Meeting is often interpreted as a public hearing. He stated his approval of televised budget deliberations, but the downside is that there are not as many people in attendance at meetings. He noted that one budget presentation would be better.

Commissioner Dauphinais asked if the Town Manager thinks it is important to have a check and balance on the Town Council and more policy and long-term investment decisions reflected in budgets.

Town Manager Oefinger stated that the community would be better served with an RTM instead of a budget referendum because a referendum offers no feedback on the budget except for a bottom-line number.

In response to Commissioner White, Town Manager Oefinger stated that the budget process is too long and complex. He stated that he would like to think there is a way to compress the process, but it is a complex document. He stated that there may be a possibility for the Town Council to finish its review of the budget before school vacation if other timeframes are adjusted between the date the budget is released and the public hearing. He stated that RTM committees often meet before the Town Council finishes its review of the budget.

Commissioner Marley left the meeting at 8:00 p.m.

In response to Commissioner Granatosky, Town Manager Oefinger stated that getting citizen input on the budget earlier in the process would be good. He mentioned that there was once a pre-budget hearing. He stated that it would be beneficial for the Town Council and the RTM to get together during the summer to discuss the budget.

Commissioner Frink reviewed the budget process of San Luis Obispo. He noted that goals are set every two years.

Town Manager Oefinger stated that a strategic plan or goal setting could make the budget process clearer and should be made before starting the process of creating the budget.

Commissioner Frink stated that he believes the Council's goals are not connected to the budget.

Commissioners thanked the Town Manager for attending the meeting.

The meeting continued with other New Business:

Commissioner Frink suggested using the phrase "expressing our preference or objection" as opposed to straw voting. He mentioned that expressing a preference may be more comfortable for some people.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that the Commission needs to come together regarding a budget referendum and having one or not.

The Commission decided that chapters III, V, and VII will be discussed at the next meeting.

Commissioner Mello questioned if the Commission should invite the Mayor and a Councilor to a meeting.

Commissioner Mello stated that phrases he heard tonight include: people do not like goal setting, Town Council function, Council goals divorced from budget. He stated that it seems like there is too much difference and to get rid of the difference is to absorb the RTM with the Council of nine members because there is a lack of communication and cooperation.

Commissioner Frink stated that you have Democracy versus efficiency.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that the Commissioner should keep in mind what can be changed in the Charter.

In response to Commissioner White, Town Manager Oefinger stated that the Charter could include the incentive for attrition in Fire districts by reinstating a town-wide Fire Marshal.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that in the future she will suggest the Town Council Powers and Duties will include something about goal setting. She noted a previous Town Manager insisted on goals with action items. She stated that the Town Manager wanted to know how his performance was measured.

Commissioner White agreed with Commissioner Dauphinais and stated that the Council should act as a Board of Directors for the Town Manager.

Commissioner Granatosky noted that personalities come into play with the Council and RTM working together.

Commissioner Frink stated that he researched the criteria that Truckee California used to determine its Council's size. He noted that both parties in Groton did not submit a slate of nine candidates for the Town Council for the last election.

Chair Pro Tem Aument noted that he would like to look at the term "elector" in the Charter.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that there is already a budget referendum provision in the Charter.

Town Clerk Moukawsher clarified that the provision in the Town Charter that Commissioner Dauphinais is referring to is to enact a referendum on a legislative ordinance.

V. Adjournment:

A motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Frink, seconded by Commissioner Dauphinais. The motion carried unanimously by a vote of 9-0-0.

Chair Pro Tem Aument adjourned the meeting at 8:28 p.m.

Attest:

Scott Aument
Secretary